

A DAY OFF¹

By ALICE BROWN

ABIGAIL BENNET stood by the kitchen table, her mixing-bowl before her. She hummed a little under her breath, as she paused, considering what to make. There were eggs on the table, in a round comfortable basket that had held successions of eggs for twenty years. There were flour and sugar in their respective boxes, and some butter in a plate. It was an April day, and Abigail's eyes wandered to the kitchen window at the sound of a bird-call from the elm. A smile lighted her worn face. The winter had been a hard one, and now it was over and gone. This, also, was a moment's peace in the midst of the day. Her husband was comfortably napping in the front room. He had broken his arm in midwinter, and that had temporarily disarranged the habit of his life. Abigail had not owned it, even to her most secret self, but she was tired of his innocent supervision of indoor affairs, the natural product of his idleness. Jonathan was a born meddler. He interfered for the general good, and usually it did no harm; for he was accustomed, in his best estate, to give minute orders at home, and then hurry away to the hayfield or his fencing. Abigail scrupulously obeyed, but it was without the irritating consciousness of personal supervision. Now it was different.

As she felt the stillness of the day, and the warmth of the soft spring air blowing in at the window, she pushed back the bowl against her measuring-cup and made a little clink. Instantly, as if the sound had evoked it, a voice sprang from the sitting-room. Jonathan was awake.

"Nabby," he called, "what you doin'?"

Abigail stood arrested for a moment, like a wood creature startled on its way.

"My land!" she said, beneath her breath. Then she answered cheerfully, "I'm goin' to stir up a mite o' cake."

"What kind?"

"Oh, I dunno'. One-two-three-four, mebbe."

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"Where's that dried-apple pie we had yesterday?" inquired Jonathan, with the zest she knew. "Ain't there enough for supper?"

"I dunno' but there is."

"Then what you makin' cake for?"

"I dunno'. I thought mebbe we'd better have suthin' on hand."

"How many eggs is there in one-two-three-four?"

"Why, there's two, when ye make half the receipt." Abigail's tone was uniformly hearty and full of a zealous interest; but she shifted from one foot to the other, and made faces at the wall.

"Ain't there any kind o' cake you can stir up with one egg?"

"Why, there's cup cake; but it's terrible poor pickin', seems to me."

Jonathan rose and took his way to the kitchen. He appeared on the sill, tall and lank, his shrewd, bright-eyed face diversified by the long lines that creased the cheeks. Abigail stopped grimacing, and greeted him with woman's specious smile.

"Don't ye do it to-day," said Jonathan, not unkindly, but with the tone of an impeccable adviser. "You have the apple pie to-day, an' to-morrer you can stir up a cup cake. Eggs are scurse yit, an' they will be till the spring gits along a mite."

"Well," answered Abigail obediently.

She began setting away her cooking materials, and Jonathan, after smoothing his hair at the kitchen glass, put on his hat and went out. Presently she saw him, one foot on the stone wall, talking with a neighbor who had stopped his jogging horse on the way to market. There was a flurry of skirts on the stairs, and Claribel ran down, dressed in her blue cashmere, her girdle in her hand. She had a wholesome, edible prettiness, all rounded contours and rich bloom.

"Here, mother," she called, and thrust the girdle at her. "This thing hooks behind. It's awful tight. You see if you can do it."

"You wait a minute," said Abigail. "I'll wash the flour off my hands." She went to the kitchen sink, and afterwards, standing at the roller-towel, she regarded Claribel with a fond delight that always amused the girl when she could stop to note it. Claribel had told her mother, before this, that she acted as if girls were worth a thousand dollars apiece. "My!" said Abigail, pulling discreetly at the hooks, "it is tight, ain't it? I'm afraid you'll feel all girted up."

"I'll hold my breath." She held it until her cheeks were bursting with bloom, and the girdle came together.

Abigail put up a tendril of hair in the girl's neck and smoothed a bit of lace.

"Now you hurry off," she said. "If I's you, I'd put on my things an' slip out the side door, whilst father's out there talkin'."

Claribel was pinning on her hat at the glass. "What's the matter of father?" she asked.

"Oh, nothin'! only he's got one o' his terrible times—an' nobody to it, to-day. If he sees you're goin' anywheres, like's not he'll set to an' plan it different."

"Well, he need n't," said Claribel. "I've got to have some Hamburg an' some number sixty cotton. I'll be back by noon."

"You don't want I should call out to Ebenezer an' ask him for a ride?" inquired her mother, at the window, a doubtful eye on the farmer still gossiping without.

"Now, mother!" Claribel laughed. "You know well enough what I'm goin' to do. I'm goin' to walk, an' Ballard'll overtake me when he goes to get the mail. It's about time now."

"Well," said her mother, and she left the window and came to hold Claribel's jacket. "My soul!" she said despairingly. "There's your father now."

Jonathan's step was at the door. It was brisker than when it bore him forth. His face had lighted in new interest.

"Where you goin'?" he asked Claribel at once.

She was walking past him to the door.

"Oh, just up to the Corners," she answered casually. "I've got to have some things."

"You wait a spell," said Jonathan. He glanced into the glass, and decided he need not shave. "I'm goin' up along to git some onion-seed. Ebenezer says old Lang's got some, fust quality, an' if we don't look out it'll all be gone."

"O father!" cried Abigail involuntarily.

"You come out an' help me git the bits in," said Jonathan to his wife. "I can manage the rest with one hand."

Claribel followed them hesitatingly out through the shed.

"Father," she began; but Jonathan never turned. "Father!"

"Well, what is it?" he called over his shoulder, and her mother dropped behind and walked with her.

"Don't you take on," urged Abigail. There were tears in her own eyes, and the warm air on her forehead made her think of

youth as well as spring. "You know he can't drive very well, on'y one hand so. Don't you mind."

Claribel's tears also had sprung, and two big crystal globes ran out and splashed her cheeks.

"It was a kind of an agreement," she said passionately. "Ballard's got two watches picked out at Ferris's, and he wants me to see which one I like best. He'll be awful mad, and I shan't blame him."

"Father," called Abigail. "Father!" She ran on into the barn where he had the horse standing while he gave him an impatient one-handed brushing with a bundle of hay. "Father, Claribel's made a kind of an agreement to go with Ballard. You wait a minute whilst I slip on my t'other dress, an' I'll go with ye."

"Here, you git in them bits," said Jonathan. "God sake! Don't you hender me when that onion-seed's goin' by the board. They'll be married in four weeks, won't they? Well, I guess Claribel can stan' it if she don't see him for twenty-four hours."

Abigail got the bits in, and went on deftly harnessing. She spoke but once. That was when Claribel came and began to fasten a trace.

"Go 'way, dear," said the mother, in an eloquent tenderness. "You'll git horse-hairs all over you."

Then Claribel stepped silently into the wagon; her father followed her, and they drove away.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when they came home. Jonathan was in high spirits. He had got his onion-seed; and then, having heard of an auction, five miles farther on, where there was a cultivator as good as new, he had bought some crackers and cheese at the grocery and driven there. He and Claribel had eaten their lunch in the wagon, and then Claribel had sat drearily by while her father bid and reft bargains away from other bidders. Now Claribel was heavy-eyed, and her mouth looked pitiful. She ate sparingly of the early supper her mother set out for them, and then, after washing the dishes, sat awhile by the window in the dusk. Her mother knew she was watching; but Ballard did not come, and at nine o'clock the girl walked droopingly off to bed.

Abigail was late in going to sleep that night. She lay looking into the darkness, tears sometimes gathering in her eyes and then softly wiped away on a corner of the sheet. It was not that she failed to bear a little disappointment for Claribel; but, to her

mind, youth was youth. There were times when one wanted things, and if they had to be put off, they were not the same. One bud could never open twice.

When breakfast was over, Jonathan settled himself in the sitting-room with the county paper, and Claribel slipped into the pantry and beckoned her mother. The girl spoke shyly:

"I don't know but I'll run over to Ballard's and ask his mother for that skirt pattern."

"So do," said Abigail, with understanding.

"You see"—Claribel went on. She bent her head, and the corners of her mouth trembled. "I don't want you should think I'm foolish; but yesterday was a kind of a particular day with us. 'Twas a year ago yesterday we were engaged, and it was kind of understood we were going to look at the watch together. The reason I told Ballard I'd walk along and let him overtake me—well, I didn't dare to have him come here, for fear father'd spoil it somehow. And then he saw me drive by with father, and not a word to say why, and father was in a hurry and wouldn't let me stop—and if I was in Ballard's place I should be mad as fire."

"You go right over," responded Abigail, something throbbing in her voice. "Slip out the porch door, and clip it right along."

Again Abigail stood at the table, her mixing-bowl before her, and at the clink of her spoon Jonathan's voice came promptly from the other room:

"Nabby, what you doin' of?"

This time her muttered exclamation had the fierceness of accumulated wrongs, but she added cheerfully:

"I'm mixin' up a mite o' cake."

"What kind?"

For an instant Abigail compressed her lips, and then she added, desperately, as one whose resolve had hardened:

"Cup cake."

"How many eggs?"

"One." At the instant of speaking, she took two eggs from the basket and, one in either hand, broke them at the same instant upon the edge of the bowl. Jonathan's ears were keen, but they did not serve him against the testimony of that one innocent crack. Abigail beat them hastily, and pouring them into her butter and sugar, breathed again.

"You call Claribel. I want her to help me a mite down sullar," said Jonathan, on his way to the kitchen.

Abigail, at his step, crumpled one eggshell in her hand and hastily thrust it into the coals. She laid a light stick over it.

"I want to have her sprout some o' them 'taters in the arch."

"She can't do it this forenoon," said his wife glibly. "She's gone out."

"Where?"

"Down to Mis' Towle's. I sent her to carry back that peck measure you borrowed last week."

A strange exhilaration possessed her. Abigail did not remember to have lied willfully in all her life before. Her difficult way had been, against all temptation, to tell the bare truth and suffer for it; but now that she had begun to lie, she liked it. She looked at her husband, as he stood in the doorway gazing innocently over her head at the window where the spring made a misty picture, and wondered what he would say if he guessed what was in her heart. She hardly thought herself, save that it was something new and wild: the resolve to say anything that came into her head, and take the consequences. Jonathan was pondering.

"Why," said he slowly, at last, "seems to me I carried back that peck measure myself, day or two ago."

Now Abigail remembered seeing him walk out of the yard with it in his hand; but she did not flinch.

"Oh, no, you didn't! Claribel's just took it."

There was another pause, and Jonathan spoke again.

"Claribel asked me for some money t'other day. Said she wanted to git two more gowns. You think she needs 'em?"

"I know she does," returned Abigail vigorously. "You don't want she should walk out o' this house without a stitch to her back, do ye, an' have Bullard set to an' clothe her?"

"You gi'n her any money this winter?"

Abigail remembered her hard-won store of butter-and-eggs money, put aside from the moment Ballard had begun his courting, and she remembered the day when she and Claribel had stolen off to the Corners to spend the precious store in fine cloth and trimming. But she looked her husband straight in the eye.

"Not a cent," she answered, and liked the sound of it.

"Well," concluded Jonathan, "I'll hand her some to-morrer. I'll make it what you think's best."

For a moment her heart softened, but Jonathan spoke again:

"You ain't a-goin' to make weddin' cake, be ye?"

The strange part of her new communion with him was that, as

her tongue formed the lie, her mind flashed a picture of the truth before her. Now she had a swift vision of the day when he had gone to town meeting, and she and Claribel had baked the wedding cake, in furious haste, and set it away to mellow.

"No," said she calmly; "I ain't a-goin' to make no cake. I got a little on hand."

"When'd ye have it?"

"Oh, I dunno'! I got a loaf or two."

"Well," Jonathan ruminated, "I dunno's I remember your bakin' any."

"I didn't bake it. 'Twas some Aunt Lucretia left in her crock when she moved out West." She thought with wonder of the ease with which new worlds could be created merely by the tongue. It gave her a sense of lightness and freedom. She could almost forgive Jonathan for meddling, since he had introduced her to these brilliant possibilities.

"That's terrible yellor for one egg," he commented, as she poured her cake into the pan.

"It had two yolks," said Abigail calmly. She felt an easy mastery of him. Then she closed the oven door, cleared off her cooking table, and sat down to sew.

This was one of the days when Jonathan seemed possessed by the spirit of discovery. He took up a bit of edging from the window-sill, and held it in a clumsy hand.

"How much do ye pay for that trade?" he inquired.

"Two cents," responded Abigail.

"Two cents! That's more'n two cents a yard!"

"No. It's a cent an' a half a yard an' five yards for two cents. We got five."

"I never heerd o' such carryin's on." Jonathan spoke helplessly. "They can't do business that way."

"They do." She spoke conclusively.

He took up another wider remnant. This was a coarse lace.

"How much d'ye pay for that?" he asked.

"Nothin'," said Abigail. "I made it."

Jonathan ruminated. He felt exceedingly puzzled. It was not that he distrusted her. No moment of their life together had failed to convince him that she was honest as the day.

"I dunno's I ever see you doin' anything like that," he commented. "How'd ye do it? Looks as if 'twas wove."

"I done it on pins," said Abigail wildly.

"Common pins?"

"No. Clo'es-pins."

Jonathan frowned and gazed at her, still reflecting.

"Mebbe you could make some to sell," he ventured. "Looks as if there might be some profit in't."

"I don't want no profit," returned his wife, unmoved, and Jonathan presently went out to the barn, ruminating by the way.

Then when his step had ceased on the shed floor, Abigail laid down her sewing. She looked briefly up to heaven, as if she interrogated the bolt that was presently to stun her; but the bolt did not fall, and she began to laugh. She laughed until the tears came, and her face, suffused with mirth, looked a dozen years to the good. She dried her eyes, but without wiping away any of that new emotion. She could not yet blame herself for anything so rare.

The noon dinner was on the table, and Claribel had not come. Her mother had set forth a goodly meal, and she talked cheerfully through it. But Jonathan was never to be quite distracted.

"Where's Claribel?" he asked, with his second piece of pie.

"She ain't comin'," answered her mother, at random. "I'll set suthin' out on the pantry-shelf, an' she can have it when she wants."

Jonathan paused, with a choice morsel on the way to his mouth.

"You don't s'pose she's fetched up at Ballard's an' stayed there to dinner, do ye?" he asked.

"Well, what if she has?"

"Nothin', only I wanted to know. I'd step over there arter dinner an' fetch her."

Abigail laid down her fork. She spoke with the desperation of one already lost.

"Now, father, I'll tell ye plainly, I ain't goin' to have Claribel disturbed. She's up-chamber, layin' down with a sick headache, an' I've turned the key in the door."

"Well, ye needn't ha' done that," Jonathan wondered. "She might as well sleep it off."

"I'll sprout the 'taters," she asserted vigorously, "but I ain't a-goin' to have her round with a headache an' git all beat out so she don't do a stitch o' work to-morrer."

Jonathan said nothing, and after dinner she sped upstairs, locked the door of Claribel's room, and put the key in her pocket. Then, with a mind at ease, she washed her dinner dishes and

went down cellar. There she sprouted potatoes with a swift dexterity and a joyous heart. Claribel was abroad somewhere, she knew, roaming the free world. That was enough.

At five Jonathan finished his nap, and came heavily to the door above.

"Here, you," he called. "I've be'n up-chamber to find out how Claribel is. The door's locked an' there ain't no key inside. You got the key?"

Abigail rose and dusted the dirt from her hands. Her task was done.

"No," said she. "I ain't got no key."

"I thought you said you locked the door. Didn't you take the key?"

Abigail was mounting the cellar stairs. She faced him calmly.

"No, I never said any such thing," she returned, with an easy grace. "Clary's locked it, I s'pose. If she don't answer, she's asleep. You let her be, Jonathan. It's no way to go routin' anybody out when they've got a headache."

"Well," said Jonathan, and grumbled off to the barn.

Abigail felt more and more under the spell of her new system. It swept her like a mounting flood. She had lied all day. It was easy and she liked it. With a mirthful feeling that some compensation was due Jonathan, she made cream-of-tartar biscuits and opened quince preserves. The one-two-three-four cake was golden within and sweetly brown on top; it had not suffered from the artifice that went to the making of it.

The door opened and Claribel came in. She had her jacket on her arm, and her cheeks were all crimson bloom. A fine gold chain was about her neck, and immediately she drew a watch from her belt and opened it, with a child's delight.

"Look, mother, look!" she cried. The words followed one another in a rapid stream. "He wa'n't mad a mite. He said he knew 'twas something I couldn't help. And we went and got it, and had dinner at the hotel. I guess I shan't ever forget this day long's I live."

Abigail was holding the watch, spellbound over its beauty. But at that she broke into a laugh, wild and mirthless.

"No," said she, "no. I guess I shan't either."

"Mother, what you mean?" The girl was answering in a quick alarm. "Anything happened to you?"

Abigail quieted at once.

"No, dear, no," she said. "I've had a real nice day. On'y I w kinder worried for fear you wouldn't see Ballard, an' all. Now you take off your things, an' father'll be in, an' we'll have supper."

But when they were sitting at the table, Jonathan kept glancing at Claribel, her red cheeks and brilliant eyes.

"Ain't you kinder feverish?" he asked, and Abigail answered:

"See here, father. Ballard's give her a watch. Ain't that handsome?"

Jonathan turned it over and over in his hand.

"I guess it cost him suthin'," he remarked. "Well, to-morrer we'll see if we can't git together a little suthin' more for clo'es."

Claribel went to bed early, to dream, with her watch under her pillow, and the husband and wife sat together by the fire below. When the clock struck nine, they rose, in lingering unison, and made ready to go upstairs. Abigail cleared her sewing from the table, and Jonathan shut the stove dampers and wound the clock.

"They've got that feller over to the Corners," he announced, as he waited for her to set back the chairs.

"What feller?"

"The one that stole Si Merrill's team. They clapped him into jail, an' I guess there'll be consid'able of a time over it. He hadn't a word to say."

Abigail was standing before him, her hands clasped under her apron, as if they were cold. Her face looked tired and pale. She spoke with a passionate insistence.

"Jonathan, I've found out suthin'. It don't do to do the leastest thing that's wrong."

"Why, no," Jonathan acquiesced, getting a newspaper and laying it before the hearth for the morning's kindling. "Anybody's likely to git took up for it."

"It ain't that," said Abigail. Her small face had grown tense from the extremity of terrible knowledge. "You might go along quite a spell an' not git found out. It's because"—She halted a moment, and her voice dropped a note—"it's because wrong-doin's so pleasant."

"You take the lamp," said Jonathan. Then he remembered that the argument should be clinched, and added, with his Sunday manner:

"The way o' the transgressor is hard."

"It ain't," asserted Abigail, at the stairs. "It's elegant. It's enough to scare ye to death, ye have such a good time in it, an'

ye go so fast. It's like slidin' down hill an' the wind at your back. Mebbe the feller that stole Si's team grabbed an apple off'n a tree once an' that started him. I don't blame him. I don't blame nobody."

Jonathan was beginning the ascent, and she paused and looked back at the kitchen, as if there were the inanimate witnesses of her perfidy.

"I've had a splendid day," she said aloud. "I've had the best time I've had for years. I ain't ever goin' to have another like it. I don't dast to. 'Twouldn't take much to land me in jail. But I ain't sorry, an' I ain't a-goin' to say I be."

"What you doin' of down there?" called Jonathan. "Who you talkin' to?"

"I'm comin'," said Abigail. "I'll bring the light."